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CHRISTIANITY AND ART.

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CHRISTIANITY AND ART

A TRACT FOR THE TIMES

BY

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"The *literati* of that period were neither citizens nor patriots; and were completely governed by the false French doctrine of *art for art's sake*."

JOSEPH MAZZINI, *Works*, *vol. i. p.* 9.

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CHRISTIANITY AND ART.

'He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.'
—*Isa.* liii. 2.

THIS text forms a part of six verses, three of which conclude the 52nd chapter and the remaining three commence the 53rd chapter of the Book of Isaiah, in which the humiliation of Christ is described, prophetically, with almost startling vividness.

Observe the portrait drawn of the Saviour. After telling us that the Servant of Jehovah, the Messiah, would in the end prosper and be exalted, the prophet then says that many were *astonished* at the Christ. He gives us the reason. They expected that the Anointed of God, the Chosen One, the Redeemer, the King, would be recognised by the magnificence of His outward form and estate. On the contrary He Who came was a man of *marred visage*,

disfigured by pain and want and neglect, more than any man. His body, instead of being upright and full of kingly pride, was bent under a terrible weight of suffering. The marks of mental strain, of spiritual effort, as well as of physical hardness of life, were upon Him. Says the prophet, 'He hath no form nor comeliness'—none of those physical excellences which were expected by men. He had 'no beauty' whereby men might naturally desire Him. Despised, rejected, sorrowing—men turned away from His marred visage, and esteemed Him not.

Such is the remarkable prophetic portrait of Christ. And, as Calvin says, the description is not only true of His person, it is equally true of, and, doubtless, equally intended to describe, His entire public life; His whole state of humiliation; in which there was no 'form' to attract human eyes, no beauty, no magnificence. What the prophet foretold, history has confirmed. The person of Christ and the external circumstances of His ministry as viewed by the eyes of ordinary men, are very literally and sharply delineated by these words.

As we contemplate this picture we realise afresh the forces which Christianity found arrayed against it.

First, there was the spirit of Judaism. The Jewish Ritual was formal and scenic to the last degree. The robes of the priests and officials were picturesque, costly, elaborate. The accessories of worship, the altar ornaments, the gold and silver jewels, the architectural decorations, were excessively rich. The ceremonial, the incense-burning, the stately and solemn music, these also were full of 'pomp and circumstance.' They appealed to, and took captive, the senses. The Jew, who regarded with pride the ritual worship of the Temple, found the bareness of the humiliation and Cross of Christ a stumbling-block.

Then, secondly, there was the Greek, with his artistic and literary culture, his refined taste, his intellectual hauteur.

He turned up his fastidious nose, he exalted his supercilious eyebrows, and straightway pronounced the Cross foolishness. The religion of the Greek was 'the apotheosis of the beautiful.' In literature, in oratory, in architecture, in sculpture, Greek taste was the highest and most perfect standard of excellence which the world has ever known. Little wonder that in seeking after a religion the Greek confounded the physically beautiful with the morally good.

Now, it was these two forces, both of them tenacious in their hold upon human nature, both sensuous, that Christ and His disciples had to confront when they preached the Gospel of God to men. The prophet says 'many were astonished at thee.' The Jew left his gorgeous rite, the Greek paused in the contemplation of voluptuous beauty, and gazed at the 'marred visage,' at the ragged following of disciples, and they had no desire to know more of the men or of their message.

That abrupt contrast between the ideals of God and of men yet remains so far as the spirit of the Gospel is concerned. That is still marked by its simplicity. There is something of home-spun in its character. The unchanged Christ is still 'meek and lowly of heart.' His humiliation is of the essence of His power and the well-spring of His glory. It is quite impossible that any proud and mitred priest should represent Him before men.

And the message which the Gospel to-day proclaims to men, bears the mark of its origin. Its spirit is the spirit of Him Who girded Himself with a towel and washed the feet of His disciples. The man who frankly professes this Gospel, Society instantly marks as a 'weakling.' To be devout they regard as an eccen-

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tricity. A man who strictly governs his life by the word and spirit of the Christ, they regard—to use a very expressive but a very colloquial word—as a little *soft*. When you come to close quarters, and set aside empty conventions, it is easy to discover that the Cross of Christ is an offence to the world.

What then is the attitude of the Gospel to that beauty which the world failed to find in the person of Christ, and in the outward presentation of His truth ?

We must first recognise that physical beauty is the creation of God.

It is God that made the lily of the field beautiful ; it is He Who made the outgoings of the morning and of the evening to rejoice. It is He Who robed the morn in mystic beauty, and made the star of morning fair. It is He that has given to the child, the youth, to the woman and to the man, a beauty of form higher than all the rest of His creation.

And it is God Who has given to humanity the faculty to admire and enjoy beauty in all its forms. If Art be the interpretation and the idealisation of this beauty, if it express by form and colour, by proportion and symmetry, by rhythm and melody, the deep spirit of beauty, the tenderness and the strength, the tears and

laughter, the transfiguring hopes and the tragic fears, of human life there is no reason to deny to Art, in its comprehensive sense, a divine foundation. Least of all should a Christian fail to recognise that it springs from the grace and gift of God.

But here let us point out that there is something of higher worth than physical beauty. So much is plain enough to us, when we consider that Christ, when judged by men, lacked in many particulars that 'form and comeliness' which might have gained favour in their sight.

Authentic Christianity can exist, as from the beginning it has existed, under very plain and austere conditions. The russet coat, and even fustian, can cover a very true Christian man.

And there is an opposite truth which to-day no one of you will venture to dispute. Under the fair exterior, under robes of tyrian purple, you can have a heart of rottenness. Satan may appear, and does appear, as an angel of light.

Periods of great artistic activity, when art and culture have held supreme sway over Society, have been among the most profligate periods known to history. When Michael

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Angelo was building the great dome of St. Peter's, when Raphael was painting the Annunciation, when Lorenzo de Medici was lavishing riches and honours upon authors and artists, the mass of the Italian people were sunk in degradation and superstition ; while the higher grades of society were utterly corrupted with every conceivable vice.

The great truth which history ancient and modern teaches us is that physical beauty, and all the refinements of culture, lend themselves easily to the purpose of vice. The palace of pleasure is richly gilt ; it is transfigured by art ; its fair flowers and cool fountains and soft music are very captivating to the senses. While duty, sacrifice, fidelity, conscientiousness, appear hard, and rude, and unattractive.

But we must learn to see a higher beauty in moral integrity. We must learn, and the lesson is plain enough, that nothing is good, nothing worthy, that is not in its heart moral and pure and holy.

We have been afflicted for years as a nation by an utterly corrupt school of art and literature. It has claimed freedom from moral control. Whether in choice of subject, or in method of treatment, art could not suffer such restrictions. And so it revelled in disease, in

debased realism. Its motto has been 'art for art's sake.' But once again we have seen with pain, that whatever man does, that is not regulated by moral considerations, ends in the pit. If it were not for our Christian Churches, our Sunday Schools, and our Christian homes, it is terrible to think what might have become of London after twenty years of this Satanic school of art and literature. For it has flooded our magazines, has captured some of our principal journals, and is rampant and obtrusive on the right hand and the left. The novels of the day are very largely corrupted by this influence, and those written by women are said to be the most offensive. You cannot go to many of our picture galleries but you find the same thing painfully in evidence. And if anything were wanting to complete the debauchery of our time, we import without restriction from France, what may be lacking in the supply of our native products. And let any one raise so much as the meekest protest and at once there is a literary and artistic 'skeleton-army' let loose upon him. While the truth which men are still evading is, that this debased taste, this worship of the beautiful as it is called, this delight in that which is merely sensuous, divorced from all moral considerations, began

with the pre-Raphaelite school, and with its purely sensuous and erotic pictures and poetry. It was a thing of the flesh from the beginning.

But we cannot separate any part of man's life, any department of his activities, from his moral nature, without the gravest danger. Everything we do we can only do, as morally responsible creatures. It is as true of our recreation as of our work; as true of our eating as of our fasting; as true of our art and literature as of our worship and our prayer. Whatsoever we do we are to do it 'unto the Lord.' It was Matthew Arnold who said that 'conduct is nine-tenths of life.' He was wrong. Conduct is the whole of life.

And we are to observe degrees. Since our great human characteristic is that we can do nothing that is not governed by ethical considerations, our first concern is to aim at that which is morally beautiful. The hand of the great chemist, Liebig, was burnt and eaten by the chemicals he had been employing in making his long and important series of experiments. It was in the high service of mankind that he had toiled and sacrificed himself. But we are to see a greater beauty in the marred hand of the chemist than in the soft snowy hand of the

idle æsthete. The hospital nurse whose face is eaten and pitted through her daring devotion in the time of a great epidemic, has a beauty denied to the countenance of the idle and voluptuous woman of fashion, with all her washes and cosmetiques. The missionary who came from Africa with his arm mangled and useless, had not the beauty of a Greek statue. But in the eyes of those whose hearts were pure, he had a manly beauty, a shining virtue, of a far higher type. The greatest Figure in all history, the noblest, the manliest, the most beautiful, was without external 'form and comeliness,' a 'root out of a dry ground.' But the world has granted prëeminence to Him, above all others. The reason is that He lived to do good; that He cared for the poor and lowly and the outcast; that He freely denied Himself for the sake of others. And so, apart from the conviction that millions cherish, that He is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world, there is a still larger constituency who proclaim Him the most beautiful and the most noble personality in the long story of mankind. And it matters little, it does not affect the common judgment one whit, if you tell them that His hands were hardened with toil, that He was never arrayed in purple and fine linen, and was not a frequenter

of kings' houses. They will point you to His magnanimity, His pitifulness, His purity, His self-denial.

And there is health to our nation in preaching this Christ—the Saviour that had no outward 'beauty, that men should desire Him.' To show the loveliness of His Cross, the bitter, hard, disfiguring, Cross, is a priceless service in an age given up to vicious luxury and the worship of the fading veil of earthly beauty. There can be nothing beautiful that is not good, there can be nothing good that is not Christlike. And to be Christlike is not a thing of intellectual brilliance or of æsthetic refinement; it is to bear in our bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus, to form our tastes in the light of the Cross, and to have that Cross branded upon mind and heart and will. And that is a beauty which shines through the outward disguise of physical imperfection, and the austerities of self-sacrifice. It is an inward transfiguring light.

It is no contradiction that He Who had no beauty that men should desire Him, in our eyes should seem as fair as the lily of the valley; that He Who had neither form nor comeliness, should be to us the chiefest among ten thousand and the altogether lovely; that

He Who came to earth in threadbare penury, should change as we reverently gaze upon Him and become 'glorious in His apparel.' He has the beauty 'that fadeth not away,' the transcendent beauty of goodness, purity, and self-denial.

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